

# **PUBLIC AGENDA**

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## **NEBRASKANS WEIGH IN ON ESSENTIAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS**

***A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT REPORT  
BY PUBLIC AGENDA***

Presented to the  
**Nebraska State Board of Education**

**December 9, 2004**

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## **I. Executive Summary**

Public Agenda was asked by the Nebraska State Board of Education and the Nebraska Department of Education (referred to hereafter as the State Board and the NDE) to help design and implement a public engagement process that would allow a cross-section of the state’s citizens to comment on the central ideas contained in the document *Equitable Opportunities For an Essential Education For All Students— Recommendations for Nebraska Public School Districts* (referred to hereafter as the “Essential Education Document”). Toward that end Public Agenda conducted focus groups and community conversations with over 370 parents, students, educators and members of the general public from roughly 25 districts, including Aurora, Battle Creek, Beatrice, Gibbon, Hay Springs, Kearney, Lincoln, Norfolk, urban and suburban Omaha, and Stanton.

*Finding 1: People have an expansive vision of the educational opportunities that should be available to all students, and their views are generally consistent with the State Board’s thinking*

Participants in the focus groups and community forums were asked about the educational opportunities that they thought ought to be available to all students. They responded with a rich and wide-ranging list of curricular offerings, including the academic basics, communications skills, foreign languages, the arts, social skills, health and citizenship.

People also emphasized such components of an essential education as applied, hands-on learning opportunities; differentiated learning to meet the needs of different kinds of students; quality teachers and administrators; up-to-date facilities, materials and technology; small classes; life and social skills, including teamwork, respect for diversity and money management; and safety, respect and discipline in the schools.

Most participants viewed the State Board of Education's Essential Education Policy Statement, outlining its position on essential educational opportunities, as useful and in synch with their own thinking.

*Finding 2: Gaps in the existing essential educational opportunities*

Several areas were flagged in all three community conversations as needing attention if schools are to offer students the essential educational opportunities that people want them to have, and that are outlined in the Essential Education Document. These included class size; safety, discipline and respect; facilities, equipment and technology, and ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of high-quality teachers.

*Finding 3: Most people felt it is highly appropriate for the State Board/NDE to take a leading role in working on the concept of an essential education*

The vast majority with whom we spoke thought all of Nebraska's students should have the same essential educational opportunities, a position that seemed driven for many by the values of fairness and equity. They felt that it was very appropriate for the State Board and NDE to take a leadership role in defining an essential education and setting policies in motion that would support the concept.

*Finding 4: Caveats and Concerns*

While most participants supported the State Board's essential education initiative, they also offered important cautions and caveats that ought to be taken into account as the policy process progresses. These include concerns about small districts keeping up, additional bureaucratic red tape, overwhelming existing teachers and finding enough qualified new ones, implications for facilities requirements, loss of local control, and implications for school funding overall.

## II. Introduction

On December 5, 2003, Nebraska's State Board of Education passed the following resolution:

WHEREAS, the State Board of Education:

Recognizes that the State Board of Education, the Legislature, and the Governor have always held public education to be one of the highest priorities of this State.

Believes that access to an essential education is a constitutional right of every child.

Believes that providing an essential education for every child is the responsibility of the policymakers and citizens of Nebraska.

Believes that schools should be defined, organized and financed so as to create the capacity to provide an essential education.

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED:

- (1) That the State Board of Education adopts the document entitled Equitable Opportunities For an Essential Education For All Students—Recommendations for Nebraska Public School Districts delineating expectations for Curriculum, Staffing, Support Services, and Facilities/Environment that are essential for all Nebraska schools; and
- (2) That the State Board of Education forwards this document to state and local policymakers for their consideration and response; and
- (3) That the State Board of Education directs the Commissioner of Education to implement a formal public engagement process to verify and validate the concepts and recommendations of the document and to do so at the earliest possible time based on the availability of private funding.

Public Agenda was asked by the State Board of Education (State Board) and the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) to help with item (3). Our task was to design and implement a strategy that would engage a cross-section of Nebraska's citizens to explore how the ideas of the State Board match up against those of citizens and stakeholders in different parts of the

state. We also sought to find out how comfortable people are with the State Board/NDE taking a leadership role in devising state policies that address essential educational opportunities for all students. Do they have questions and concerns that state policymakers ought to take into account?

To address these issues, we designed a process that brought together a cross-section of Nebraska's citizens to weigh in on the primary concerns (if not every technical detail) of the document *Equitable Opportunities for an Essential Education for All Students—Recommendations for Nebraska Public School Districts*. This document, which may be found on the NDE website, is referred to as the “Essential Education Document” throughout the report.

Prior to Public Agenda's involvement, the State Board and the NDE had already received a research report from the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) drawing on online survey data.<sup>1</sup> The McREL research gauged the level of importance different stakeholder groups placed on various components that might underlie the concept of an “essential education.” Building on this foundation, Public Agenda worked with the NDE to develop a program of qualitative research (i.e., focus groups) and community conversations (or “forums”) to further vet the concepts that the State Board/NDE were developing and to explore any concerns citizens might have about the venture overall.

### *Focus groups*

We began conducting a series of focus groups with two aims in mind. One was to gain an initial qualitative reading of people's views on the topic of essential educational opportunities. The other was to assist us in designing materials for a dialogue process that we would eventually use in three large-scale community conversations that took place following the focus groups in November 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey on Essential Education for All Students: A Nebraska State Board of Education Proposal*, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), April 9, 2004.

Public Agenda conducted the following focus groups, each with roughly eight to twelve participants in each.

- Superintendents from a cross-section of districts (large and small) across the state including: Skylar, Nebraska City, Hay Springs, Elkhorn Valley, Aurora, Shickley (within Elkhorn Valley), Central City, York, Cozad City, Norfolk.
- Principals from a cross-section of districts, including: Bruning Davenport, Loup County, Grand Island, Gibbon, Madison, Bennington, Fremont and Valparaiso.
- Teachers from the Kearney school district
- The general public from Kearney and the surrounding area
- Parents with students in Omaha Public Schools
- Parents with students in public schools in suburban Omaha
- Parents from Battle Creek, Norfolk and Stanton
- Students from Battle Creek, Norfolk and Stanton
- A mix of parents, teachers and students in Lincoln
- A mix of parents, teachers and students in Beatrice

### *Community Conversations*

Upon completion of the focus groups, Public Agenda worked with school and community leaders in Grand Island, Papillion-La Vista and Gering to organize community conversations on the essential education initiative.

These three sites were invited by NDE and chosen because they roughly reflect the diverse array of districts and regions across Nebraska. Each site was asked to develop a leadership team comprised of both educators and citizens from the community. Public Agenda took over from there, providing each site with training for organizers, moderators, recorders, as well as discussion materials we developed specifically for the project. Public Agenda also attended each community conversation, collected the data generated by the process and summarized it, first for each district and then overall (in this report).

A major task of each local organizing team was to recruit a diverse cross-section of local citizens to participate, including parents, students, senior citizens, recent graduates, religious leaders, employers, teachers, among others—essentially, the range of diverse voices in a community who can speak to different sides of educational issues, so that people can learn from others with different perspectives. Organizers also set out to recruit average citizens and participants who roughly reflected the demographics of the local community, rather than just the activist types who typically attend public meetings. Additionally, local organizers recruited moderators and recorders and took care of all logistics involved with hosting the events, including providing dinner.

After registration and dinner, the forums opened with a short plenary session welcoming participants, then proceeded to break-out groups of 10-15 diverse participants each where the substantive dialogues took place, and closed with an ending plenary session in which each moderator offered a brief summary and a few highlights from his or her group's discussion.

The small group dialogues in the breakout groups covered the following ground:

15 minutes	Orientation, Introductions, Ground Rules
40 minutes	What are the essential educational opportunities that all students should have available to them?
10 minutes	Which of these essential educational opportunities are your local school strongest in, and which need more attention?
5 minutes	Of those items needing more attention, which are most critical to pay attention to first?
15 minutes	Thoughts about State department of Education's Document on Essential Education? (Handout of State Board Policy Statement.)

15 minutes	How can schools, families and the wider community do a better job of working together to provide the best possible educational opportunities for all students?
10 minutes	Next Steps

Over 250 people attended across the three sites. Attendees were recruited primarily by invitation, which is generally the best way to ensure good diversity and representation. In all instances public notices and announcements were also employed to generate additional participation. Post-forum surveys reflected a strong majority reporting the conversations were more representative of the overall community than usual for public meetings.

The section that follows speaks to the results of the focus groups and forums. All approaches to public opinion and engagement have their strengths and weaknesses. The information and insights that emerge from a series of carefully structured focus groups and community conversations are a source of qualitative data distinct from quantifiable survey results. Surveys allow one to generalize from a sample of respondents to a larger population in a relatively precise way. They do not, however, allow one to discuss matters in depth; to observe how people react to complex new information, and how people's thinking evolves as they discuss matters with others who may have very different perspectives and views. Nor are surveys as democratically transparent and open to participation as are community conversations. We believe the focus groups and forums offer a great deal of valuable information about how a broad cross-section of people across the state of Nebraska responded to the idea of defining and providing a set of essential educational opportunities for all students.

### III. Findings

#### **1. Nebraskans have an expansive vision of the educational opportunities that should be available to all students. The views of regular citizens are generally consistent with the State Board's thinking**

We began the focus groups and break-out sessions in community forums by simply asking participants what *they* thought all students should have the opportunity to learn, experience and be exposed to in school. In others words, rather than ask them to review the 58-page Essential Education Document, we asked them to brainstorm and come up with their own ideas about the essential educational opportunities students should have. We could then compare their thinking to that reflected in the Essential Education Document.

*All students should have a wide variety of educational opportunities in school*

The lists that citizens from various walks of life and parts of the state generated were fairly consistent. Moreover, they were expansive, covering a lot of curricular and extra-curricular ground.

Not surprisingly, they often began with the academic basics (no one expressed any doubt that things like reading, writing, math and computer skills were absolutely essential for all students). But they also felt that many other areas were critical for all students, including communications skills, foreign languages, the arts, social skills (e.g., teamwork and respect for diversity), health and nutrition, and citizenship.

Teaching styles and diverse learning opportunities were also areas of considerable interest to citizens in the focus groups and forums. There was a great deal of discussion of the importance of hands-on learning, differentiated learning to meet the needs of different kinds of students, well-trained and caring teachers and administrators, and problems-solving and critical thinking skills .

Finally, participants paid a good deal of attention to facilities and the school environment. They stressed the importance of school safety, respect, small classes, and up-to-date materials, equipment and technology.

*Foreign language study an area of strong interest*

In the discussions, people tended to talk quite a bit about the importance of foreign language study. It appeared to be almost universally accepted that foreign languages are essential, in particular Spanish.

*“My son speaks fluent Spanish, and he’s gone to Colorado to be a park ranger. It’s come in really handy for him.”* (Norfolk Parent)

Some felt a wide range of languages were essential, while others were satisfied with Spanish, French and German. Even some students felt that foreign languages were not emphasized enough.

*“Our counselors...they aren’t really pumping you up to go another year.”*  
(Beatrice Student)

Many also thought that foreign language instruction should start *earlier*—at the elementary or even kindergarten level.

*“Every industrialized country has more than one language in school, from the elementary level. I think we start it too late...two years of high school Spanish, I had it, and I can’t remember a thing.”* (Norfolk Parent)

*“Life Skills” & “Social Skills” important to a significant number*

Another area that received a good deal of attention was life and social skills. While some argued, “That’s the parents’ job,” a significant number of citizens wanted the schools to focus on things like time and money management, getting along with people from diverse backgrounds, character education, team work and other life and social skills.

*“I think the diversity thing is very important for these kids. There are kids from India, kids from Asia. There are kids from everywhere and all of the Hispanic community that is so big in Omaha. I think it is very important, vital actually, for their survival...to be accepting of all people.” (Omaha Parent)*

*The “required” vs. “optional” distinction*

Certain potential essential education items led to a discussion about whether they should be *required* of all students, or whether they should be *available* as opportunities for selected students. One area where this was occasionally debated was history. For example, one Omaha parent in a focus group thought history, at least in the upper grades, should be optional, arguing, “They don’t ask you history questions on a job application.” But another parent in the same group responded, “It may not get you the job...but it may get you the promotion.”

Similar discussions emerged regarding advanced course work in foreign languages, math and science.

*“I think sometimes we spend a lot of time focusing on, like math in particular, we have these kids working their tails off to figure out high level trigonometry. The question I used to ask was, am I ever going to use this? Now I’m thirty-something and I know the answer is no.” (Omaha, suburban Parent)*

It appears that this is an area where people's thinking is open rather than decided, and therefore an area where leadership can readily have an impact on people's views.

*Most felt the State Board's thinking was in synch with their own*

Once participants finished developing their own notions about an essential education, we asked them to consider the way in which the State Board was approaching the issue. Most viewed the State Board of Education's Essential Education Policy Statement, outlining its position on essential educational opportunities (reproduced below) as useful and in synch with their own thinking.

***POLICY ON ESSENTIAL EDUCATION***

Approved by the State Board of Education

August 8, 2003

The State Board of Education believes that all students in Nebraska public schools should have equitable opportunities for an essential education. An essential education is one that enables students to reach the following outcomes.

Students will be:

- Proficient in meeting the State's academic content standards and essential learnings
- Successful at each educational level and in transitioning between those levels from early childhood through postsecondary education and/or career entry
- Effective in functioning in and contributing to our culturally diverse democratic society

The Board further believes that all districts should provide the following components of essential education:

- Qualified and competent administrative, teaching, paraprofessional, and operational staff
- Integrated, planned curriculum that prepares students to achieve state standards and to reach the outcomes identified above.

- Comprehensive support programs and services that meet the diverse needs of students
- Safe, clean, and supportive facilities and learning environments

People’s reactions to this statement were generally very positive— almost all agreed that it was a “pretty good way” to define an essential education. They tended to see consistency between their own thinking and the general thrust of the State Board’s statement.

*“Most of the items covered by the document were the same as those we came up with.”*  
(Grand Island Forum Participant)

*“I think the majority of the items that we discussed as pretty important or critical are falling into this [document].”* (Beatrice Educator)

*“I think that’s a pretty good way to define it.”* (Omaha parent)

*“That’d be nice...”* (Norfolk Student)

## 2. Gaps in the existing essential educational opportunities

The citizens we spoke with were generally positive about the state of their schools.

*“I think the schools have done a good job...my kids are in Omaha Public Schools, and I deal with lots of people in Millard schools... I think there is a mixture of different school systems in the area that have all done a good job of learning what works and what doesn’t.”* ( Omaha, suburban Parent)

*“We have teachers that come from, like, Kansas City and they go, ‘Wow! This is a piece of cake.’”* (Beatrice, School Aide)

But they also pointed out some weak spots that offer hints about some of the work that would likely need to be done to transform a vision of an essential education into a reality. In this discussion, we only note issues that appeared significantly in the majority of sites across the state where we held community conversations or focus groups.

### *Class size*

Across the three community conversations (in Gering, Grand Island and Papillion-La Vista) class size was one of the most frequently cited areas that people thought school leaders should pay attention to in order to ensure that all students receive an essential education. The theme came up in some of the focus groups as well.

*“We talked about overcrowding...I transferred my child because of that situation.”*  
(Omaha, Parent)

*Safety, discipline and respect*

Other areas that were mentioned a number of times across different settings as deserving of special attention were issues of school safety, discipline and the general theme of respect for others.

*“I have a big concern, because my son is really skinny. He gets bullied a lot—how can you send your son to a place that is not safe?”* (Omaha Parent)

*“We see more anger at the elementary level, where the anger used to start at the junior high and be in the high school...last year, the junior high in Norfolk had death threats.”* (Norfolk, Parent.)

*Facilities, equipment and technology*

The physical needs of schools, including adequate facilities and up-to-date equipment and technology, were often a concern that participants felt should be a priority.

*“Our chemistry lab is empty...you can do three things and you’re cleaned out...this stuff has probably been around since our parents were in school.”* (Norfolk area student)

*Teacher quantity and quality*

In some of the community conversations and focus groups—but not all—there was a concern about the number and quality of teachers.

*“We’ve had three math positions open within the last four years, and we had maybe three or four people apply for each position. You don’t have a lot to choose from there.”* (Norfolk area Student)

*“A qualified staff is going to be an issue. If you look at the advertising this year in the area of science, we must have had 30 schools looking for science teachers. Well, colleges in Nebraska graduated maybe 15 science majors this year and so that’s an issue. You need a full-time librarian. There’s isn’t a program in the state [anymore] that certifies librarians, is there?”* (Superintendent)<sup>2</sup>

### *Guidance counselors*

Guidance counselors were a topic that surfaced in several of the focus groups. Some people were satisfied with the counselors and the job they were doing, while others were not.

*“My son graduated last year, and we’ve had a heck of a time getting financial help...every time I went into the school to ask a question about college, they’d throw a book at me and say, ‘the answer’s in here.’”* (Beatrice Parent)

*“...they’re very good counselors but they have so many kids that are so needy.”* (Norfolk Parent)

*“Only the kids that really know what they want, they are going and getting the help. There are a lot of kids that don’t look for the help that could really use it, and they [the counselors] don’t have time to work one-on-one with all of those kids.”* (Norfolk Parent)

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<sup>2</sup> Most quotes by superintendents and principals do not have a location attached (as do other quotes) because they occurred in focus groups in which confidentiality was promised.

**3. Most people feel it is highly appropriate for the State Board/NDE to take a leading role in working on the concept of an essential education**

The dominant view across the state is that it is very appropriate for the State Board/NDE to be working on the concept of an essential education. Perhaps a school administrator from the Papillion-La Vista district best summed up the typical reaction we encountered with the statement, *“If they’re not working on this, what are they doing?”*

Many of the arguments for the State Board of Education’s involvement were based on the values of fairness and equity. People simply think it is the right thing to do to see to it that all Nebraska students have excellent educational opportunities, not just those who happen to live in wealthier districts.

*“We need to make sure that everyone gets the education. That is their key to life. [It’s] key to the success of our country.”* (Omaha suburban Parent)

*“I went to Westside schools, and I know that people [there] pay outrageous taxes, but I think it is wrong that...if you send your kids to Westside schools, they are going to get ten times better education than [others].”* (Omaha Parent)

*“I think there needs to be a curriculum that says we’re going to teach all of these things in every school so that every student gets the same opportunity.”* (Beatrice Parent)

*“From a teacher point of view, everybody should have equal opportunity. It’s part of a democratic society and public schools in a democratic society...”* (Kearney Teacher)

*“Defining what an essential education is to students, I think would be an asset. We are here to do the best we can for every kid, not just the kids in the city.”* (Principal)

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*“...it is hard to argue from a conceptual standpoint that anything in [the NDE Document] isn’t good for every kid, whether in Cozad, to Millard, to the Westside.”*  
(Superintendent)

#### 4. Caveats and Concerns

While the vast majority with whom we spoke favored the State Board/NDE's leadership on the Essential Education Initiative, there were a number of concerns expressed as well. NDE and the State Board should pay attention to these issues as it moves ahead in the policy process.

*What about small districts?*

In many instances, debate spontaneously developed over what the State Board's essential education initiative could mean for small districts. Some wanted to shield small schools from new demands by the state, arguing they provide a good enough education even if they don't or are unable to offer everything outlined in the Essential Education Document. Others thought that students at some smaller districts were being shortchanged, and that the essential education initiative could be an important way to address this. This debate is illustrated in the following exchange between two parents in a Beatrice focus group:

*"I attended a very, very small school as I was growing up. My school could not have had an ESL classroom. They couldn't have had early childhood [programs]. [But] I got as good of an education there [as anyone else.]"* (Beatrice Parent)

*"I came from a small school too. I think I had a really good education, but not all kids get that. There are certain things that I think need to happen. The school has to do it with the state or whatever to see that those things happen."* (Beatrice Parent)

Some professional educators expressed similar concerns, but many also thought small districts, or at least many of them, could rise to the challenges implicit in the Essential Education Document, especially given the right support.

*“In reading [the Document]...it was somewhat scary, especially knowing resources are extremely tight. Small schools especially...there’s no way we’re going to be able to meet these expectations unless they totally change the way we get funding.”*

(Superintendent)

*“Even though I’m the smallest school here by far, we do offer most of this stuff, but that’s just because I have a staff that can do it. We do offer a middle school Spanish, you know, we do that.”* (Superintendent)

*“I think some of the smaller schools will search for alternatives. There are some that are enlisting the help of community colleges and distance education. Just having a teacher in the room, even though that’s the way it’s traditionally been done, doesn’t necessarily mean everything has to be worked out that way.”* (Kearney group, Teacher)

#### *Different stakeholders, different concerns*

Some concerns were characteristic of specific categories of stakeholders. Among some members of the general public and some superintendents, there were occasionally concerns about *local control*.

*“Let’s not drag the state into this...that’s a local control issue.”* (Beatrice Parent)

*“Another thing our board has talked about in regard to this, just on the initial review of it that they got, is they were concerned about we’re supposed to be a local-controlled state and here we are going to give up more of our decision-making ability at the local level to the state.”* (Superintendent)

Frankly, while this sort of reaction came up from time to time, we were more struck by how rarely local control was a theme. And it was characteristic of the discussions that the parent,

quoted above, softened in his concern as the discussion evolved—later on he said that he thought it probably was a good idea that the State Board/NDE work on the issue. However, even if local control concerns were only occasional and not particularly hard-edged in these discussions, it would not surprise us if they became somewhat livelier as the document is translated into policies that have real impacts on schools across the state.

Among some teachers, *red tape* was a concern.

*“I think our educational system is already running around in circles trying to cut through the red tape now. If you add an additional bunch of statutes, it might be much harder to get there.”* (Beatrice Educator)

Among some principals, *managing teachers* was a concern. They talked about having enough planning time for their teachers, and the fact that the teachers were just getting used to standards, and that this would impose something new on them yet again.

*“They have the standards, and we are asking them to integrate different things into the curriculum [already].”* (Principal)

Among superintendents, the main concern was one or two hard things that jumped out at them. They tended to feel that they were already covering most of the items in the document. Of the remainder, they tended to see one or two things that they thought would be tough to accomplish without significant help. For example, how would they find enough *qualified teachers* to cover all the course offerings that the document implied? Or how would they deal with the section of the Essential Education Document on *facilities*?

*“What’s going to kill us is the part dealing with facilities. We have an old 1907 building. I always say we’re climate controlled. What ever the climate is outside, that’s what it is inside.”* (Superintendent)

*“[My district] is probably not one of the largest, but in Nebraska is a fairly large district, and we’re going to be inordinately challenged to deliver all-day kindergarten because not only is it a staffing issue...we have facility issues all over the place.”*

(Superintendent)

*“Can I use my language arts teacher to teach a section of world languages?”*

(Superintendent)

Some were afraid it would mean giving up something they were already doing:

*“You do this, something else is going to give...That’s the greatest concern that is coming from my district when we start looking at these things. Yes, it’s extremely important, but what we are doing also is very important, and therein lies the concern.”*(Superintendent)

### *The funding question*

The question we set out to explore in this phase of public engagement was how an essential education ought to be conceived. It soon became apparent that funding is a critical issue that will need to be addressed if the essential education initiative is to move beyond the conceptual stage.

Indeed, questions of finances came up from time to time among all stakeholder groups.

*“You have the State Department Commissioner saying you have to do more things and then you’ve got the legislature going the other direction withdrawing resources. We’ve lost half of our state aid. I receive half now of what I did five years ago. When you talk about the department guaranteeing resources, it’s not the department, it’s the legislature.”* (Superintendent)

The spirit of many of these comments was nicely summed up by a teacher from the Kearney area:

*“The argument that everybody always has with No Child Left Behind is that the federal government is mandating this, but they aren’t backing it up financially. If we add this, which is coming from the state, it actually makes more sense, but is the state going to set it up financially?”*

### III. Conclusions

In the course of this public engagement campaign approximately 370 parents, community members, students and educators from approximately 25 districts across the state weighed in on the Essential Education Initiative. Based on the similarity between the concepts about essential education that participants developed on their own and those outlined in the Essential Education Document, the thinking of the State Board/NDE appears to be in synch with the thinking of citizens and stakeholders. Moreover, the vast majority of participants felt it was highly appropriate for the state to be leading this issue—there was relatively little “push-back” around local control, and much support for the principle of equitable opportunities for all students.

At the same time, there also emerged a number of significant concerns about both the feasibility and the implications of the initiative. These included concerns about red tape, the implications for small districts and, of course, unresolved questions about funding and resources. The upshot appears to be a concept of “essential education” that makes good sense to people as a goal, with a great deal left to do in the way of implementation. It’s not surprising, then, that the following questions were frequently raised at all three community forums:

- How realistic is this?
- How will this impact on schools?
- How, where, when will the definitions of “essential education” will be determined and by whom? What are the State Board’s plans?
- What kind of accountability will there be for districts in relation to essential education policies? How will the NDE know it is actually working?
- How is this going to be funded?

A superintendent commented, *“I’ve been extraordinarily surprised by how much agreement there is on the ‘what.’ It’s the ‘how’ and the ‘when’ that scares people to death to some degree. That’s what I think you’ve heard.”*

It is likely that public engagement will be just as important—and most likely somewhat more challenging—as the State Board and NDE cross the bridge from conceptualization to policy and implementation.

*“I think for a first step that’s good—at least they [State Board/NDE] shared with us their perspective of what kids in Nebraska should know and learn... I think it’s a good idea for us to say as a state, here’s what we think every kid in Nebraska should have the opportunity to do. We haven’t had that before...”* (Superintendent)

## Appendix: Notes from Community Conversations in Grand Island, Gering and Papillion-La Vista

### 1. Essential educational opportunities all students should have (Beginning with most frequently mentioned items under each category)

#### Curriculum

- Good, solid, “basics” education—reading, writing, math, science, etc.
- Communication skills
- Technology—use of and applications
- World languages
- Arts and music
- Vocational training
- Health and nutritional education
- Physical education
- Life skills (e.g. balancing checkbook, résumés, deal with clutter, logic, budget)
- Character education, including work ethic, manners, social values
- Career preparation, including internships and job skills
- Extracurricular activities
- Cultural/religious diversity awareness training
- College readiness
- Starting foreign language in elementary school
- Social studies, history, politics, economics, citizenship
- Pre-K opportunities
- Public speaking
- Study skills
- Rigorous, challenging content
- Christian perspective to life and education
- Debate skills

#### Staff

- Well-trained, caring, highly-qualified teachers and administrators (by far the most frequently discussed item under this heading)
- Professional development opportunities
- High student and teacher expectations
- Good paraprofessionals and assistants

#### Learning Styles and Experiences

- Hands-on, practical, applied learning
- Problem-solving skills

- Differentiated learning experiences (teach at students' level whether gifted or special needs)
- Critical thinking skills
- Study skills, work habits
- Teamwork
- Extracurricular activities
- Love of learning
- Opportunity to develop leadership skills
- Mentor programs
- Multiple learning methods
- Lifelong learning
- Higher expectations
- Balanced approach to religion in education (i.e., more religion in schools)
- Think "outside the box," engage in dialogue
- Opportunity to fail

#### Facilities, Infrastructure and Environment

- Safe schools, free of violence and bullying
- Small class size
- Up-to-date equipment and materials, including books and labs
- Good technology and computers
- Clean, adequate facilities
- Library/media/research

#### Miscellaneous

- Better school-home communication and more family involvement
- Equal opportunities for all students
- Adequate funding
- Early education, Pre-K, etc.
- Importance of addressing discipline, bullying and unruly behavior
- More help for minorities
- Wary of tracking or pegging students at a young age
- Equal treatment and value for athletes and non-athletes
- Curriculum choice should match local values
- Healthier school food and vending machines

## 2. Areas needing attention in order to provide essential educational opportunities

### **Priority items across all three sites**

- Class size
- Facilities – high school, middle school, elementary new and improvements
- Safety, discipline and respect – person to person, people outside school
- Student motivation
- Foreign language

### **Additional priority items by site:**

#### **Gering**

- More K-12 coordination of curriculum
- Recognizing student needs (scheduling)
- It's okay to fail and make mistakes (we learn from mistakes)
- Applying knowledge (connections between subjects)
- Consistent curriculum across grade levels
- Students who fall through the cracks – those in the middle

#### **Grand Island**

- Too much testing
- Too many requirements by feds, state – not enough time for teaching
- Time to teach new ideas
- ELL opportunities
- Teacher training
- Writing skills

#### **Papillion-LaVista**

- Technology integration into “core” areas
- Vocational opportunities
- Current and updated library resources
- Pre-school opportunities
- Better materials and textbooks needed
- Specialized individual services for students

### 3. Comments and Questions Raised by the State Board’s Policy Statement on Essential Education

(Beginning with most frequently mentioned themes)

#### Comments

- More specifics needed<sup>3</sup>
- Makes good sense
- Highly appropriate for state to be working on these issues
- Most of the areas covered by the document were the same as those we came up with
- It is the state’s responsibility to provide equitable resources
- The state needs to provide more professional development
- Smaller districts can not afford to offer programs or to implement standards
- These should be recommendations not requirements, guiding principles only
- This will increase teaching to the test/requirements
- Early childhood emphasis (prior to school) very important
- “Proficient” may not be fair for all students
- Does not allow kids to fail and learn from those failures
- State standards aren’t rigorous enough
- Need to add “up-to-date” facilities
- Should be more student centered
- This does not take into account the starting abilities of the kids

#### Questions and Requests for additional information<sup>4</sup>

- How realistic is this?
- How will this impact on schools?
- How, where, when will the definitions of “essential education” will be determined and by whom? What are the State Board’s plans?
- What kind of accountability will there be for districts in relation to essential education policies? How will NDE know it is working?
- How is this going to be funded?
- Will NDE consider what has taken place at the public forums?
- What does “proficient really mean?” What happens if kids are not proficient?
- What does this mean for small schools and consolidation?
- Will this allow local schools to make any of their own decisions? Are we headed towards a state test for graduation?

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that while we referred people to the web site where they could obtain a copy of the entire NDE Document—which contains a great deal of detail—time did not permit us to work through the entire document with participants. All they saw was the one-page State Board Policy Statement that introduces the document.

<sup>4</sup> Listed in approximate order in which these items were mentioned. This section is supplemented by responses in post-forum participant surveys to the question, “Is there any additional information you feel would be useful as you consider the issues raised by today’s discussion.”

**NEBRASKANS WEIGH IN ON ESSENTIAL  
EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS**

- What about districts that exceed standards? Will they be rewarded?
- What about standards for home schooling?
- Is this document a “proactive” response to NCLB?
- What about SPED kids who are held to these standards?
- Are we using national or state standards?
- Is parental input requested on standards?
- What are the politics behind this initiative?
- Are there any restrictions on teaching methods – how creative can teachers be in trying to reach each student?

#### 4. How should we follow up on this community conversation?<sup>5</sup>

- Publish report of findings by region/forum and total—by email and snail mail
- Use the information gained from these forums to help them do a better job in making policies for public education in Nebraska
- Come up with adequate funding requirements/financial involvement-no more unfunded mandates
- Implement ideas in an action plan, and inform the public about actions they intend to take/have taken
- NDE should share the results of these forums with legislature
- NDE should create advisory panel in partnership with school boards and community leaders
- There should be meaningful discussion on web pages of NDE
- Continue forums like this one with local school administrators, community members, parents, etc.
- Be flexible on “proficiencies”
- Keep control of the schools at the district level; Allow more local control when determining what is essential-the community need should determine “essential or priority”
- Explain the No Child Left Behind legislation; I would like more information on their take on it.

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<sup>5</sup>Listed in approximate order in which these items were mentioned. This section is supplemented by responses in post-forum participant surveys to the question, “How would you like to see the State Department of Education follow up on today’s conversation?”

## About Public Agenda

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